Castlemaine Naturalist

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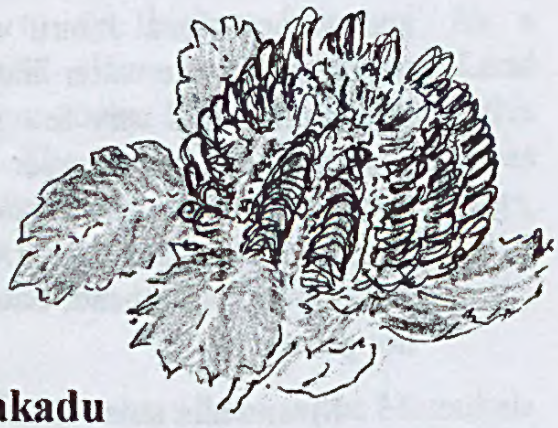

Katherine to Kakadu

Our few days in Katherine N.T. during July were mostly taken up with social obligations and left few opportunities for bird-watching. At the resort area there were two spacious aviaries among the tall palms, one occupied by a pair of magnificent Eclectus Parrots and the another by a pair of Hooded Parrots and a noisy demanding Varied Lorikeet - obviously used to being fed by visitors!

On a brighter note, there were many Bar-shouldered Doves and Blue-faced and Brown Honeyeaters at large among the palms and flowering shrubs. A family of Grey-crowned Babblers fed on the grassy nature strip at the edge of the road on occasions.

A sunset cruise in the Katherine Gorge had been organised for the wedding guests and relatives on both sides of the family to mingle and become acquainted. For two hours from 4.30 p.m. we travelled peacefully along admiring the scenery, with Rainbow Bee-eaters skimming the water to drink, and kingfishers diving from the vegetation at the edge. At one point as we travelled close to the base of the tall red cliffs, a pair of Peregrine Falcons in the process of feeding young on a ledge high above put on a great aerial display in their efforts to distract us. Further along, a medium sized fresh water crocodile basked on narrow strip of sand at the edge of the water. A Blue-winged Kookaburra was also seen.

We had decided to take the long way round to Darwin for the return flight home, and with a daughter to drive, hired a car to travel back via Kakadu National Park for a brief visit. After an overnight stay at Pine Creek, where we were entertained by the antics of Greater Bower-birds and Blue-faced Honeyeaters at a nearby bird bath as se breakfasted, we set out for Mary River roadhouse and the entrance to the Park from the south, and along the Kakadu Highway to Cooinda by lunch time.

The roadside vegetation along the plains area varied from Darwin Wooly-butts covered with orange blossom, Northern Grevilleas and an abundance of Turkey-bush with masses of starry deep pink flowers, to Pandanus as we approached the South Alligator river area, all indicative of the generous rains of the recent wet season.

From Cooinda we drove the short distance to Yellow Waters to take the board walk out over the beautiful paper bark swamps where egrets, ibis and an occasional Jabiru were peacefully feeding, surrounded by exquisite mauve and white water lilies. It was warm, humid and serene; no mosquitoes in evidence, and very few people. Restless Flycatchers fussed around as we passed by a nest in a paper-bark, and at the end of the walk and a few metres distance out into the swamp, there was a White-breasted Sea-eagles' nest atop and a ancient dead tree. A fledgling was visible and the parent birds were circling overhead, one at an increasing height, with a Torresian Crow in hot pursuit!

Meanwhile some finch-like birds were coming and going from the base of the nest, difficult to identify against the glare of the midday sun. Slater's Field Guide states that Black-throated Finches sometimes nest at the base of eagles' nests, but if so, these would seem to be well west of their usual range A large catfish glided past just below the surface of the water, and as we reluctantly turned to retrace our steps a distinct "snap" was heard behind us. nothing visible except widening ripples on the water, a small crocodile? or perhaps just overactive imaginations?!

Next stop was the impressive Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre just down the road, and from there to Nourlangie Rock to take the circular walk past an ancient aboriginal cave-like shelter with several fascinating art sites around the area. We climbed to the lookout point for a grand view of the escarpment and distant flood plains.

At Nourlangie parking area there were many *Grevillea dryandri* with upright scarlet plumes of flowers and needle-like foliage.

We spent the night at Kakadu Lodge and Caravan Park near Jabiru, in a comfortable air conditioned cabin in a bush setting. Several of the trees here were covered with tufts of yellow blossom which we identified from a park booklet as *Xanthostenon paradoxus* (no common name given). As we sat on the small verandah to enjoy the peaceful night before retiring, a Bush Stone-curlew darted around us in the semi-darkness, seemingly in pursuit of insects. There was an abundance of crickets. Later, during the very warm night we heard a series of eerie curlew duets.

Our destination next day was the "Border" Store and Ubirr Rock in the far north-west of the park - the East Alligator River area on the Arnhem Land border. Almost everything a traveller or camper may need was available at this ramshackle store, including accommodation and take-away food. Here we replenished our banana supply and had morning tea as well.

Ubirr Rock consists of strange and spectacular formations - huge square and rectangular blocks piled up at random over an extensive area. There was

a pleasant breeze here for the arduous climb to the lookout area on different levels, past may more shelters and rock paintings to the highest "plateau" for a breathtaking panorama over vast wetlands and plains to the Arnhem Land escarpment. Kapok trees grew precariously from rocky crevices, leafless at this stage, but with striking red and gold flowers. The vegetation on the flat areas approaching the Rock consisted of a mixture of Pandanus, melaleucas and eucalpts, with an understory of various shrubs such as grevilleas and Turkey-bush. We returned to Jabiru for lunch, and thence to the Arnhem Highway en route to the Stuart Highway and Darwin.

Along the Arnhem Highway we turned off for the short drive to the Mamukala Wetlands to spend a couple of hours in observation hides overlooking extensive swamps, well populated with bird life. We relaxed in the cool breeze off the water, and tried to identify the birds near and far. There were terns, Magpie Geese, cormorants, ibis, egrets, one or two distant Jabiru, shelduck, Grey Teal, Pacific Black Duck, Wandering Whistling Duck, and Pygmy Geese. Directly below us on the lily pads there were several Jacanas and chicks, one of the reasons I had always hoped to visit here, and delightful to watch. We were most reluctant to leave this blissful place - still no mosquitoes!

We had a fuel and drinks stop at Kakadu Resort where the restaurant-reception area and motel units are all built in hexagonal yurt style. A central hexagonal "tank" from floor to ceiling held two magnificent Baramundi floating around in leisurely fashion and turning a disdainful eye on us.

Late afternoon found us passing through Corroboree and Humpty Doo to the main highway and into Darwin at sunset. Next morning we drove to Stokes Road wharf where David was in his element among the ships at berth. The "Franklin" , a fisheries research boat, a cattle cargo boat with strange mushroom type ventilators rising from the deck and a brand new vessel, the "San Juan", built at Freemantle for coast guard duty in the Philippines, with a friendly first mate willing to explain all the details.

The Indo-Pacific Marine centre in this area is a must for anyone interested in the marvellous collection of live marine and reef creatures, and has a marine biologist guide to explain it all. They have managed to maintain a growing section of reef in perfect balance and health in an extensive pool. Many curious life forms can be viewed at close quarters in various glassed-in tanks - my favourites were the Decorator Crabs which were busily covering themselves with pieces of colourful seaweed. One had concentrated on the head, "Carmen Miranda" style, and another had completely covered itself, but still waved a feathery frond in one claw in vain search for available space to which it could be attached.

We left after two hours to head to the airport for our respective flights, to Newcastle and Melbourne, hoping to return for further explorations of the Top End sometime in the future.

Shirley Parnaby

BOCA BIRD CHALLENGE 2000
Saturday 2 December

Morning, afternoon or all day, whichever suits you.

Meet at the Octopus (the old Information Centre opposite the Castle Motel) in Forest Street.

Morning 8.30, afternoon 1.15. Some of the groups which are continuing into the afternoon will be coming back to the Octopus for lunch around 12.30.

Bring Lunch if you are staying out all day (or joining us for lunch at the Octopus), snacks and drinks, binocs, sun hat and sunscreen, bird book if you have one.

Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association Campout at Howlong.

VFNC campouts are held twice a year, on the long weekend in March, and in Spring. They are highlights of the Field Naturalists' Year.

Accommodation was at Kismet Riverside Lodge, ideally situated on the banks of the Murray River, about 20 km west of Albury. The long weekend began on Thursday 12 October, with a talk by the vice-president, who outlined his research project on Brolga populations, followed by a slide show of local eucalypts.

Over the next two days there was a range of excursions. We visited first the Bonegilla Grasslands, at the Bonegilla railway siding. I wonder if any of the migrants arriving here realised that they were arriving at such a species rich area? Next we went to the Nail Can Reserve, which is a bushland reserve at the edge of Albury. Many plants were the same as at Castlemaine, but most grew to a much greater size.

In the afternoon we were to go to the Lower Ovens River at Peechelba. The Ovens is an unregulated river, and, because of the rain, was in flood. Instead, the excursion was to TSRs. These are Travelling Stock Reserves, strategically placed along inland NSW roads, for the benefit of drovers and travelling stock. Grey-crowned Babblers greeted us at our first stop. The reserves have never been ploughed, and the two we saw were rich in herbland species, including orchids.

On Saturday the outings were to Mt Pilot multipurpose park and to Chiltern Box Ironbark National Park. Another two beautiful areas, with lots of birds and lots of wildflowers.

Sunday's outing was based at Kentucky State Forest. This is a cypress pine forest with similarities (and differences) to Terrick. The cypress pines

are of two ages, one dating to the 19th century, and the other to the introduction of myxomatosis. Orchids restricted to cypress pine forests were a highlight here. The introductory talk was given by Steve Campbell, accompanied by a nesting Gerygone, and a family of White-winged Trillers.

Evening talks included "Our disappearing woodland birds of the sheep/wheatbelt area" with Ian Davidson, and "Why we need floods" with Mike Copland.

Altogether a delightful four days. We learned much about the natural history of the region with knowledgeable local field naturalists. Orchid watchers would have been delighted with the sighting of many new species of orchid.

Campouts are not to be missed. Ern Perkins.

Thrill Seekers

Some people get their thrills bunjee jumping, horse racing, mountain climbing or whatever takes their fancy, but Maureen and I had one of our greatest thrills ever on arriving at our local Bells Swamp in early November, not long after the BIG rains. The rebirth of a swamp; the thrill on arrival, not only the visual effect of the swamp full of water and wildlife so quickly after so many dry years, but the vociferous sound effects from the treetops, water level, and the frog chorus below, is a memory that will be with us for ever.

In all we recorded 41 bird species, the highlight being one Regent Parrot flying overhead from east to west. Other good sightings included Nankeen Night Heron, Olive-backed Oriole (several) large flocks of Straw-necked and Sacred Ibis, Cockatiel (one bird), Musk Duck, Hardhead, Sacred Kingfishers, several White-necked (Pacific) Herons and an abundance of Red-rumped Parrots, Musk Lorikeets and Eastern Rosellas, with only one raptor, a lone Whistling Kite recorded.

We will be back out there again this year, but we won't quite have the thrill of witnessing the rebirth of a swamp. Ken and Maureen Dredge

FROM THE COMMITTEE

Nominations for 2001 Committee

You will find the **nomination form** for the 2001 Committee in your Castlemaine Naturalist this month, and **we would encourage you to use it. We need new members on the committee** for fresh ideas, and Maureen feels she needs to take a year off. Perhaps you know someone whom you feel would be very capable, or perhaps you would like to be part of the Committee yourself.

We are a happy bunch, and the meetings are not long and always amicable, but there is always room for new blood and new ideas. **Don't feel that you "don't know enough".** You mightn't know the botanical names of plants or whatever, but you might know of some wonderful spots to visit - perhaps you even want to learn the common names of the plants or whatever that are in that spot.

Observations

*Errata - Last month it was reported that Penny Garnett had seen a Spotted Quail-thrush at Chewton. This should have read "Irishtown". It was seen on the Irishtown track. Ed.

- Shirley Parnaby reports that at the beginning of November a pair of Wood Ducks in the Botanical Gardens had five ducklings in tow, and a Pacific Black Duck had six. Also, a female Dusky Moorhen was sitting on the bank making distressed sounds as Shirley walked close by. Immediately the male rushed ashore to land beside her and flew directly into Shirley's face to drive her away. She then realised that the hen wasn't injured but sheltering two tiny chicks. They took to the water very reluctantly but returned to the land as soon as Shirley moved hastily away.
- Stuart Morris has visited the spot on the Tourist Road in Kalimna where the Tiger Orchids (Diurus sulphurea) have been seen over the last few years. Last year there were 10 right in the gravel at the side of the road, this year there were 16 were on both sides of the road and a grand total of over 30.
- Stuart also brought a couple of photos of a very large Choughs' nest which he found at Black Hill near Kyneton.
- Ken and Margery Cross have found a Powerful Owl not far from their place near Macedon - actually it was found by a photographer who told of the huge owl he had photographed, and he showed them where it was. They also have had Crescent Honeyeaters which haven't been seen there before that they are aware of.
- Debbie Worland reported a pair of Darters at the dam on the Castlemaine Golf Course, and a Noisy Friarbird at Mia Mia Road, Newstead. She wonders if it might be the one that had been on the Golf Course.
- Ken Dredge said that he had seen a Large Black Cormorant, a Little Pied Cormorant, a Great Egret and the Darters all in the same tree on the dam in the Golf Course one afternoon.
- Anne van Gemert commented on the numbers of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos that are building up on their property at Taradale.
- Up at the Point in Kalimna Tony Morton has found the rare Common Skipper (used to be the White-spotted Skipper) Butterfly. The caterpillars feed on lomandra, which is found in the area. The butterflies are very localized.
- George Broadway commented on the number of Onion Orchids he has seen on the Poverty Gully Track on his way to the Monk, and there were hundreds of Bulbine Lilies and a large patch of Leek Orchids on the Monk itself early in November.
- As he was returning via the south end of the Monk he heard the White-winged Choughs scolding harshly, and saw a fox trotting towards him, harassed by the Choughs which were bombing it, but keeping out of

reach. George stopped still and the fox continued to trot towards him until it apparently caught his scent and suddenly fled.

- Robyn Holden reported Brown-headed Honeyeaters at their place at the top end of Hunter Street near Kalimna Park.
- There was a report from Margaret Badminton of a sighting of a Brown Songlark 1.5 km from Newstead on the road to Guildford.
- During an evening birdwatching on the Castlemaine Golf Course, though there were lots of birds settling down for the night earlier, there were no night birds seen, but I arrived home to find a Tawny Frogmouth sitting on the power line to the house. Typical! Rita Mills
- A pair of Nankeen Night Herons and a Diamond Firetail were seen at Tullaroop Dam by Ken Dredge, Margaret Panter and Rita Mills on 19/11.
- Shirley Parnaby visited a property on Mia Mia Road, Newstead, where she was shown several plants of Bitter Cryptandra in flower. There have only been a few reports of this plant from the district.
- George Broadway reported that there are quite a number of Hyacinth Orchid plants starting to appear on and near the Monk towards the end of November.
- Although the Flying Duck Orchids were not very impressive early, Stuart Morris says that later in the season there were some magnificent specimens. Ern Perkins commented that there are still some flowering in late November.
- George Broadway brought several unusual reports, which he'd been told about, to the business meeting - Rob Symmons has had a Wombat disturbing the peace under his house at Guildford (and he's got the video to prove it!),

- Curley Hartup has seen a Spangled Drongo at Newstead, (and Curley is sober, and very knowledgeable about birds!),

- and a Brown Quail was seen in the backyard of George's neighbours' house in Saint Street.
- Most Crescent Honeyeaters seem to have gone from the district now.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING, 23/10.

Photopoint Handover. The Historical Society has invited C.F.N. Club members to a social evening on Monday Feb. 5, 2001, for the formal handover of the Photopoint Project. (The Historical Society has agreed to store the documents). It is to be held in the grounds of the Old Court House in Goldsmith Crescent at 6pm. The Historical Society will supply the meat for a barbecue, and we are asked to bring a small salad or sweet to share. BYO drinks.

If you will be attending, please contact the Liaison Officer on 5472 1425, or write to the Secretary, Mary O'Toole, PO Box 655 Castlemaine before Jan 24.

Australian Naturalists' Network Register. Ern Perkins has a copy of the Register, and if you are travelling and would like to get in contact with any Clubs in Australia to visit them, or learn of the whereabouts of things of interest, contact Ern and he will give you the details.

CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST, DECEMBER 2000

PROGRAMME

EXCURSIONS **General Meetings** Are held in the Uniting church (UCA) hall, at 8.00pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. Entrances to the car parks are beside the Art Gallery and beside the Church building in Lyttleton Street. **Excursions** leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days.

Business Meetings are held on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend. January meeting is at 27 Doveton St.

VISITORS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Fri. Dec. 8. **Members and Visitors Night** - This is your chance to contribute a short talk, a few slides or such. Gluepot Reminiscences will be included. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat Dec. 9 **Picnic tea at the Cascades, Metcalfe.** Details to be decided Friday.

Thurs. Jan 25 **Business Meeting** at 27 Doveton St at 7.30pm.

Mon. Feb. 5 Photopoint Handover and barbecue at the Old Courthouse. See p. 7.

Fri. Feb. 9. **Annual Meeting** followed by **Butterflies of Australia.** Speaker is Tony Morton. UCA hall, 8pm.

Sat Feb. 10. **Bullarto Reservoir.** Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30 sharp. Leader is G. Broadway.

Fri. 9 - Mon. 12 March **VFNCA Campout at Rawson.**

There will be no General Meeting in April as the day falls on Good Friday, but there will be a small excursion on the Saturday.

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The Club has been notified of a weed orchid from South Africa, which spreads by seed, and grows very thickly, crowding out other species. A patch near Eppalock was the object of a Working Bee by a Landcare group just recently. Information and description is available from Kate Blood of D.N.R.E. on her web site at Kate.Blood@nre.vic.gov.au.

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Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the club.

2000 Committee M. Dredge (President) ph 5470 6474E. Perkins (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, J. Turnbull (treas.) ph. 5474 3005, R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Oliver, C. Morris, K. Turner, Z. Thomas. B. Maund.

Subscriptions for 2000 -

Ordinary Membership: Single ,$22 Family, $30

Pensioner or student: Single $19 Family $24

Supporting: $31

The subscription also covers postage of the 'Castlemaine Naturalist'.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine. 3450.

Incorporation # A0003010B

The Club wishes all members and families a happy, safe and peaceful Christmas, and happy Field Natting in the New Year!